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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Union de l'action féminine, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. Union de l'action féminine in Morocco, jointly with the Karama movement members across the Arab region, acknowledges the choice of the Commission on the Status of Women to focus on education and training girls and women for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work, in its fifty-fifth session taking place after the Beijing+15 review process and the new creation of the United Nations entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment called UN-Women.

2. We recognize that education and training for girls and women are fundamental to women's empowerment and to which all the States Members of the United Nations are committed. We therefore seek to achieve the goal set out below:

Raise levels of education for girls and women's access to employment in the Arab region

3. At the 10-year mark of the Millennium Development Goals, women constitute only 20 per cent of the workforce in the Middle East, compared to the global average of 40 per cent, according to the 2010 report on the Goals. In the wake of the economic crisis, the growing unemployment rate for men is limiting the women's pool of opportunities even further.

4. Women are often discriminated against in job opportunities, promotions and pay.

5. While increased access to employment has provided new economic and social opportunities for women, the jobs they occupy remain unregulated and unstable. Women workers are systematically denied their rights to equal work; permanent contracts and a safe and non-hazardous work environment.

6. Most of the time, women are subjected to sexual harassment, trafficking and economic exploitation, namely in the private sector.

7. One of the sustainable solutions is to expand educational and training opportunities for girls and for women, ensuring that the gender gap in enrolment is closed and that women have a wider range of occupations and alternatives for work and business enterprises. Expanding education and training will enable generations of women and girls to be more self-directed and successful in finding employment.

8. Arab States should undertake legal measures to ensure social justice, uphold equality of opportunities and treatment in respect of employment and occupation and guarantee paid maternity leave.

9. Although eight Arab countries have achieved gender parity in secondary schools and this has helped the overall gender gap in secondary schools in the Middle East to gain 10 points in 10 years, we note with concern that only 86 girls per 100 boys are enrolled in secondary school in our region. Ten of 22 Arab States have achieved gender parity in primary education, but overall the ratio is 92 girls per 100 boys at primary schools. These levels are trailing the greater progress made in most other regions of the globe over the past 10 years.

* Issued without formal editing.

10. Examining education levels in the Arab region, the 2010 report on the Goals acknowledges that the rapid growth of school-age populations is posing a challenge to accommodating all students, and this is affecting girls more than boys. Of the primary-age students in North Africa who are not enrolled in school, 66 per cent are girls. The global average is 53 per cent girls among non-enrolled youth.

11. Key countermeasures the Arab States should adopt include raising and enforcing the minimum age for marriage, reducing the work burden for girls in rural areas and investing more state resources in education.

12. We therefore call upon the States Members of the United Nations from the Arab States to take the measures described below.

Invest in and deliver equal access to education for girls and eliminate the gender gap

13. On the global map, only sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania have lower enrolment of girls than the Arab States in primary school. Nevertheless, there are 10 Arab States that have reached gender parity in primary education, and their high investment in education should be inciting for other States to invest in education and to promote strategies that can ensure that every girl has a seat, safe transportation and decent learning conditions.

Increase access to training and technology for women and civil society organizations

14. Access to training in computer technology is another strategy to build the capacity and services of the civil society organizations that provide adult education programmes, developing life skills and business capacities for women. In a recent survey of 67 adult education organizations in Egypt by the Women & Society Association, in partnership with Karama's education realm in Egypt, only 34 of the organizations surveyed had an e-mail address. If the trainers are not adept users of technology, their students are less likely to have the benefit of acquiring these skills. Women and girls of the Arab region need these skills to move forward in their education, their work, and to participate in and shape a society in which their rights, opportunity, prosperity and economic security are advancing.

Raise and enforce minimum age in marriage and ban labour by girls

15. Union de l'action féminine jointly with non-governmental organizations members of the Karama movement also urges Arab leaders to protect girls from early and forced marriages taking place in most Arab countries on religious and cultural basis.

16. While cases of contracted marriages of very young girls in Yemen and Saudi Arabia caught international attention through the media, such practices still take place even in countries where the age limit of marriage is 18.

17. Hence there is an urgent need to ban early marriages and to amend the law which authorizes judges to permit under-age girls to be married for arbitrary reasons or excuses, as is the case in most Arab countries. Girls should be protected from domestic work, and the private sector, namely multinational firms, should take a bigger role in ensuring that children are not exploited and that their right to education is guaranteed.

Concluding recommendations

18. We urge Arab States and all stakeholders to promote and protect women's and girls' rights to education, and to ban certain degrading practices such as early marriage, polygamy and guardianship (the wilaya), which is still in the hands of the husband only.

19. We urge the promotion and enforcement of the full rights of women related to work and employment. Our concern is to ensure that women have decent working conditions, fair treatment at work, equal job opportunities and work promotion.

20. Finally, we call upon the international community to promote strategies and policies to protect women's safety in peace and war times and to free women hostages in countries in or emerging from conflict and in all military camps, and to ensure that their right to freedom is respected.